

**An Opportunity for Expanding University-School Connections:  
Stakeholder Views of the Religion and Worldview Proposal**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article explores the results of an 18-month project exploring the opinions on Religious Education in schools and the religion and worldview's proposal (CoRE 2018) with key stakeholder groups 'outside the classroom.' This article begins with a review of relevant academic critiques and then explores the key themes revealed by the stakeholder groups in the course of the research. We highlight three key thematic areas of challenge 1) structural and resourcing issues facing RE in schools, 2) conceptual debates about key words and areas of subject focus and pedagogical approach and 3) the perceived value of the subject. These issues are explored in some depth, noting that all groups thought that greater resource sharing and cooperation between the various stakeholders was important. It concludes by arguing that this discussion offers a unique opportunity for university engagement. Although academics in particular expressed concerns about a lack of conceptual coherence in the religion and worldview proposals, we suggest that university engagement with schools could effectively model constructive discussions across differences of academic disciplines and the various ways of understanding beliefs, practices and ethical choices.

**KEYWORDS**

Religious Education, RE, Religion and Worldviews, World Religions Paradigm, School-University Connections

## Introduction

Religious Education is a statutory requirement for all school children in England, however it is not part of the national curriculum.<sup>1</sup> There are frequent complaints that those involved in Religious Studies (at university level) need to better articulate the content and importance of Religious Education (RE) to outside stakeholders such as parents and government.<sup>2</sup> The Religion and Worldviews (R&W) proposal for reforming Religious Education in schools (as first outlined in CoRE 2018) has provided an opportunity for renewed debate from many different groups who have attempted to engage government attention on the subject. This article explores the results of an 18-month project entitled 'Promoting the Exploration of Religion and Worldviews in Schools', funded by Culham St Gabriel's. The project was a collaboration between three organisations: The Open University, Inform and the Faith & Belief Forum. All three organisations have an interest in promoting critical religious literacy and increasing social cohesion; they all share a broad understanding of the category of 'religion' which emphasises 'religion as lived' in both individual and institutional contexts.

Through a series of surveys and focus groups we gathered a range of different stakeholders' views of existing RE and R&W as well as their suggestions as to how to work together to incorporate the approach into schools. We had identified key stakeholders 'outside of the classroom' (i.e. those with an interest in RE but who are not teachers) in the project design and in the initial secondary research. We solicited attitudes from 'community interest groups', parents, SACRE members, school leads, those working in local authorities, policy professionals and academics. 'Community interest groups' were defined as organisations established with a social purpose for the benefit of a community, e.g. local charities and food banks which may or may not have a religious affiliation. We will explore the findings from each group in turn before arguing that embracing the Religion and Worldview discussion is a way for university-level educators to promote and model the academic study of religion in its diversity and demonstrate its continued salience to the wider English public.

## The Background

In state-funded schools in England that are not of a religious character, Religious Education is determined by each Local Authority. Each Locally Agreed Syllabus is determined by a SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education), which should reflect the religious demography of the local area. This has been a requirement since the Education Act (1944). Schools with a religious character ('faith schools'), academies and free schools can create their own RE curriculum without reference to the SACRE or Locally Agreed Syllabus. This means that RE syllabuses vary by area and

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<sup>1</sup> It was beyond the scope of the project to look at RE in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, all of which have their own curriculums and proposals.

<sup>2</sup> These thoughts were articulated by academics in our focus groups and published research exploring critical perspectives on this point is explored in more detail below.

type of school. Despite being a statutory requirement, the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) has claimed that nearly 40% of community schools and 50% of academies without a religious character do not fulfil the statutory requirements for teaching RE at Key Stage 4 (NATRE 2019). In addition, RE is the only subject from which parents can completely choose to withdraw their child.<sup>3</sup> The material covered in school-level RE is split across university departments of Theology, Philosophy and Religious Studies. Each of these approaches has different methods and aims, although they have overlapping areas of interest.

Ofsted reports in both 2010 and 2013 suggested that the lack of clarity around aims and purposes had created confusion for teachers and a resultant drop in standards. The 2013 report, *Religious Education: Realising the Potential*, suggested that RE has great potential for promoting social cohesion and for pupil's personal development but that this was not being realised. The most recent Ofsted Research Review (2021) emphasised the importance of RE educators being able to articulate three types of knowledge used in the subject area: 1) 'substantive' knowledge (knowledge about religious and non-religious traditions), 2) 'ways of knowing' (learning approaches of 'how to know' about religion) and 3) 'personal knowledge' (awareness of their own presuppositions and values). It emphasised that all three of these areas are important for high-quality religious education teaching in schools. Some see the multitude of aims and purposes as positive whilst others see this as a particular challenge which has contributed to the 'current crisis' in RE.

Since the 1970s, RE syllabuses have largely followed the 'World Religions Paradigm'. Locally Agreed Syllabuses reflect 'the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain' (NATRE 2022a). At GCSE level, most exam boards require study of two 'world religions'. The 'world religions' approach was a movement away from confessional or instructional RE which had dominated the curriculum from the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the 1960s. Prior to the 1960s the majority of all education was implicitly or explicitly connected to Christian ethics and practices. Post-war immigration which brought a greater ethnic, cultural and religious diversity led to a re-evaluation of this approach and a call that the curriculum should reflect the growing diversity of beliefs and traditions found within modern Britain. A world religions paradigm was outlined in *Working Paper 36: Religious Education in the Secondary School* (1971), produced under the direction of Professor Ninian Smart for the Schools Council which influenced a ground-breaking locally agreed syllabus in Birmingham which incorporated multiple religious traditions. In 1967, Smart established the first Religious Studies department in the UK, which created a discipline for the 'secular' study of religion, divorced from Theology. The statutory requirement for Religious Education (as opposed to Religious Instruction) was only enshrined in legislation in the Education Reform Act (1988). Religious

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<sup>3</sup> Parents also have the right to withdraw children from sex education lessons when held as part of a relationships and sex education curriculum, but not when included in a science curriculum.

Education allowed for the creation of a multi-faith curriculum in which other religious traditions were studied on a par with Christianity.

Scholars of religion have a long history of being self-conscious about the origins and historical uses of the category of 'religion' in European history and thought. Recent critiques have characterised these underlying assumptions of comparative religious approaches as the 'World Religions Paradigm' (WRP) (Cotter and Robertson 2016, Dubuisson 2019, Masuzawa 2005 and Nongbri 2013). For many academics studying religion, the 'World Religions Paradigm' (which partially underlies current syllabus decisions in school-level Religious Education) is considered no longer fit for purpose as it reifies colonial assumptions based on a modernist, protestant Christian template. The secular study of religion found in UK-university Religious Studies departments now favours a focus on emotive, embodied and material elements of religion; the internal diversity within traditions; the growth of non-religion; as well as new theories and methods for conceptualising the category of religion itself.

Alongside these developments within university-level Religious Studies departments, there have been calls for reform of existing school-level RE for many years, intensifying over the past ten or so. Academics and teaching professionals have noted the lack of correspondence between RE and the 'real religious landscape', particularly noting increasing numbers of non-religious young people (Clarke and Woodhead 2015 and 2018; Conroy et al. 2015; Shaw and Dinham 2015).

In 2016, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) established a new independent body, the Commission on RE (CoRE), in order to review the legal, education and policy frameworks for RE and make recommendations for improvement. The Commission published its final report, *Religion and Worldviews: the way forward. A national plan for RE*, in 2018 (sometimes referred to as CoRE 2018). In this report, the commission calls for three things:

1. A new vision which incorporates the study of religious and non-religious worldviews, and a name change from RE to 'religion and worldviews'
2. A statutory national entitlement for all state-funded schools
3. Investment in teacher education and curriculum materials and a re-envisioning of the structures of local community support for RE.

This plan is the basis of what has been termed 'an education in religion and worldviews' or a 'religion and worldviews' approach. Discussion has focused on the first point, however, perhaps because there are possibilities for implementing this without the government-led structural changes which would be necessary to implement points two and three.<sup>4</sup> Trevor Cooling has described the religion and worldviews approach as a 'paradigm shift', as a new approach for framing the content of RE (2021, and with Bowie and

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<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the RE Council is continuing to draft a National Statement of Entitlement. See Stephen Pett (2022) *Religion and Worldviews in the Classroom: developing a Worldviews Approach. A Draft Resource for Curriculum Developers*.

Panjwani 2020). He suggests that religion and worldviews is ‘an approach that is both academically rigorous and meaningful for all pupils, be they religious or nones’ (Cooling et al. 2020, 26). This is based on the conviction that everyone ‘inhabits’ a worldview and that personal worldviews will be studied alongside institutional or organised worldviews, such as Christianity or Humanism. There is a proposed emphasis will be on the ‘lived experience’ of worldviews which can incorporate reflection on both individual and collective aspects of religion.

In 2022, the report’s recommendations remain an ongoing conversation. While the Conservative government claims that there will be no curriculum changes to RE in England<sup>5</sup> and there is resistance to the proposals from various quarters, many continue to promote public reflection on RE curriculums in line with the CoRE recommendations (e.g. the website, ReThinkRE (REC 2022)). There is hope that a ground swell in public support can encourage changes in the local curriculums before changes in national policy. This was the chronology in the move from instructional/confessional RE to the ‘world religions’ approach in the 1970s and 1980s.

However, there has also been quite a lot of critique of the R&W proposals since 2018 from both Religious Studies scholars as well as Theologians and other stakeholders. For example, the choice of the word ‘worldview’ has been heavily criticised from several directions as a term with its own ‘baggage’ emerging in the particular historical, social and religious context of 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany (Benoit, Hutchings and Shillitoe 2020) which makes certain assumptions about human focuses on ‘meaning making’ which may not be warranted (Hannam and Biesta 2019).

Other academic concerns have included the issue of policing the boundaries of what could be included as a worldview. Paul-François Tremlett has suggested that the CoRE 2018 proposal seeks to police the boundaries of R&W, suggesting what could and should not be included in a curriculum in a not altogether consistent manner. Moreover, he argues that R&W has the same ‘point of departure’ as the world religions paradigm, namely that religions are conceptualised ‘as containers to which can then be ascribed traits and qualities, into which can be poured particular collections of beliefs, practices, founders, texts and institutions’ (Tremlett 2021). Tremlett proposes an alternative ‘post-modern’ approach based on ‘assemblages’ in which religions are conceptualised as ‘interconnected things’ and a ‘critical religious literacy’ enables analysis of religion with attention to ‘multiple scales of the social (local, national and global)’ through a range of lenses. Fundamentally, Tremlett offers a social-scientific critique of the CoRE proposals.

A contrasting vocal critic of both the ‘post modern’ and R&W approach to religious education is L. Philip Barnes. The vision Barnes proposes maintains

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<sup>5</sup> See Damian Hinds, Secretary of State for Education, letter to The Very Reverend Dr John Hall, Chair of the Commission on RE, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2018. Part 1 - <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Letter-to-The-Very-Reverend-Doctor-John-Hall-from-Rt-Hon-Damian-Hinds-MP...-1.jpg>. Part 2 - <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Letter-to-The-Very-Reverend-Doctor-John-Hall-from-Rt-Hon-Damian-Hinds-MP...-2.jpg>



a focus on beliefs and doctrines, but aims to better equip pupils to make personal, moral judgements on the nature of religious claims, while maintaining a respect for persons - over and above a respect for beliefs (2014, 244). His hope is emphasising a philosophical and theological focus could make a 'significant contribution to the creation of a more humane, tolerant and inclusive society' (2014, 244). Barnes has also argued against the proposal that the Department of Education create a national curriculum for the subject, taking autonomy outside of the local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs), arguing that 'syllabus diversity and diversity of provision have historically been shown to be the chief sources of positive reform and renewal in religious education' (2022).

Perhaps a majority of academics with an interest in RE have taken the position that whilst worldviews is not the best term and the approach is not without problems, it is a significant step forward from the existing world religions paradigm and offers a 'new opportunity' (e.g. Chater 2020; Dossett 2019; Flanagan 2020; Freathy and John 2019). This is the position that we take.

### **Outline of the Project**

The project framing and research agenda was guided by a Steering Group of stakeholders who met three times at key junctures during the course of the research and provided feedback on reports.<sup>6</sup> The stakeholder groups were selected by the research team as having an interest in religious education in schools, but being beyond the normally consulted populations of teachers, students and representatives of religious organisations (e.g. the Council on Religious Education). We focused on five specific target groups "outside the classroom" which we thought could be effectively engaged in research: 1) 'community interest groups', 2) Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs), 3) parents, 4) school leadership and 5) academics and policy professionals.

Our three primary areas of exploration were:

1. Exploring opinions on the current state of Religious Education in English schools, including thoughts on the purpose of Religious Education and the extent to which there was perceived to be a 'crisis' in the subject.

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<sup>6</sup> The Steering Group met three times online during the course of the project to help us refine and target our research; it consisted of Bushra Nasir, CBE (CEO of the Drapers' Multi-Academy Trust), Deborah Weston, OBE (research officer of NATRE, a trustee for Culham St Gabriel's Trust, Company Secretary of the RE Council and the Chair of the RE Policy Unit for NATRE, the REC and RE Today), Janet Orchard, PhD (Associate Professor in Philosophy and Religion in Teacher Education, University of Bristol), Anthea Kenna (Headteacher at The Cathedral School, Chelmsford), Kiswana Omezi (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government), Paul Smalley (Chair of NASACRE and Senior Lecturer in RE, Edge Hill University) and Ruth Peacock (Director of the Religion Media Centre) with Neil Lawson (Department of Education) attending as an observer.

2. Exploring opinions on the Religion and Worldviews proposal, including reflections on the strengths, weaknesses and challenges of the approach.
3. To better conceptualise what resources might help stakeholders to promote high quality teaching of RE in the schools with which they are connected.

We began the project by analysing opinions on RE and the R&W approach (as outlined in CoRE 2018) which were published between 2015-2020 (Harvey 2021). As part of the initial research during Covid lockdowns of early 2021, we also surveyed current undergraduates (n=67) for reflections on their experience of RE in secondary school and RE teachers (n=25) for their thoughts on current RE and on R&W (Harvey et al. 2021).<sup>7</sup>

The second phase of research consisted of a series of online focus groups led by the Faith and Belief Forum (F&BF) between July-November 2021.<sup>8</sup> This was initially envisioned as being done in-person and in specific geographical areas, exploring the challenges faced in specific geographical areas with a focus on north/south and urban/rural differences. However, due to the global pandemic and national lockdowns, research moved exclusively to online focus groups.

We began with a series of eight focus groups with 'community interest groups' in specific chosen geographical areas to ensure that we made some attempt to understand diversity of experiences and attitudes in England. Drawing primarily on the Faith and Belief Forum's networks, we held two online focus groups in each of four geographical areas, i.e. Barking and Dagenham (N=7 then 3), Birmingham (N=13 then 6), Lincolnshire (N=5 then 2) and Sunderland (N=6 then 3).

Noticing that willingness to engage in online focus groups necessitated different methods, our approach adapted to attempting to ensure maximum participation and inclusivity nationally for the remaining target groups. Data was collected from an online focus group with SACRE members (n=9) supplemented by a survey (n=144); a focus group with parents (n=3), supplemented by a survey (n=45); a focus group with those employed in school or local authority settings, including heads of MATs (Multi Academy Trusts) and SLTs (Senior Leadership Teams) (n=6); and a focus group with academics and policy professionals (n=14). Participants were recruited through the partner organisations' existing networks, as well as through the networks of our steering group members. We supplemented existing contacts and direct recommendations with social media advertising and snowball sampling in which participants were encouraged to invite others.

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<sup>7</sup> This research was led by Sarah Harvey with the assistance of Silke Steidinger, and of Ruby Forrester and Farzeen Shahzad, postgraduate students in the Theology and Religious Studies Department at King's College London.

<sup>8</sup> Carrie Alderton, Amy Ark, Phil Champain and Anna Lockley-Scott at the Faith and Belief Forum all helped organise and facilitate the focus group sessions; either Harvey and/or Newcome also attended, took notes and analysed transcripts.

The final stage of the project was to use the data collected, especially around point 3 above, to create resources to support key stakeholders. We created resource packs targeting three different stakeholders (parents, community groups and teachers) which explore the Worldviews recommendation, encouraging more involvement in RE in schools and/or the broader movement advocating for a balanced and diverse RE.<sup>9</sup> Between June 2022 to end of September 2022, the resource packs had been downloaded 90 times. We have also created a free Open University online course called 'An Education in Religion and Worldviews', which provides an introduction to R&W and suggestions for promoting high-quality religious education in schools for anyone with an interest in the field.<sup>10</sup> In the period, July 2022 to end of September 2022, there have been 167 enrolments on the course and 94 completions. As the resource packs and online course are still relatively new at the time of writing, monitoring their uptake and impact will be ongoing.

### **Key Findings**

We will discuss our data connected to the purpose of RE across the various stakeholder groups, together with the three key challenges identified in relation to current RE and the R&W proposal. We will also offer some further reflections on parents' views – both what parents themselves have told us and what other stakeholders have said about parents. This is an interesting discussion as other stakeholders have identified parents as 'part of the problem', but this is not borne out by our (admittedly rather limited) data or the Culham Public Perception Survey. Parents are a key stakeholder in the RE debates as policy professionals believe that government will not engage in reform or better resourcing of the subject unless there is a groundswell of positive public opinion.

### **'Outside the Classroom' Views on the Purpose of RE**

As previously mentioned, there is no single identified purpose for RE and local authorities are free to set their own aims and purposes. Mark Plater (2019) distilled the perceived purposes of RE into seven different aims based on readings of locally agreed syllabuses and other materials: academic qualifications; religious literacy; religious/faith nurturing; personal development; social cohesion; understanding of heritage and critical reflection. In a survey of 513 SACRE members, he found that 'Understanding [of heritage] and religious literacy prove to be the most popular emphases, and academic achievement and faith development are the least popular' (Plater 2019, 9). SACRE members were concerned with a social function of RE which prepares pupils for 'life in our contemporary world' and promotes 'good community relationships' (Plater 2019, 14). Academic achievement was not valued highly and 'faith nurturing' and critical reflection were more polarising aims. We decided to use Plater's seven aims in our surveys of parents and SACRE members (adding the option to select 'all purposes'); we also used these categories to analyse the focus group conversations.

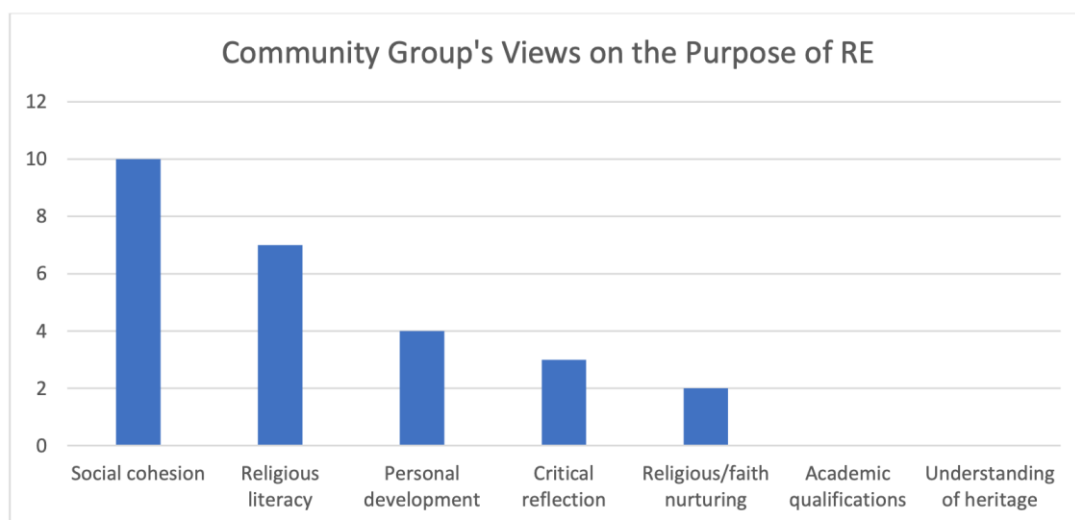
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<sup>9</sup> <https://faithbeliefforum.org/resources/religion-and-worldviews-in-schools/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/an-education-religion-and-worldviews/>



The community groups, SACRE members and parents generally agreed upon the primacy of a social function for RE. Sometimes this was explicitly framed as religious literacy and/or social cohesion. But at other times this idea was framed more implicitly as being about improving understanding self and others. There appeared to be a consensus that young people should learn a diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews in order to be able to understand and get on with others in wider society and later life. A poll was offered during the online focus group meetings for the community groups with the following results:

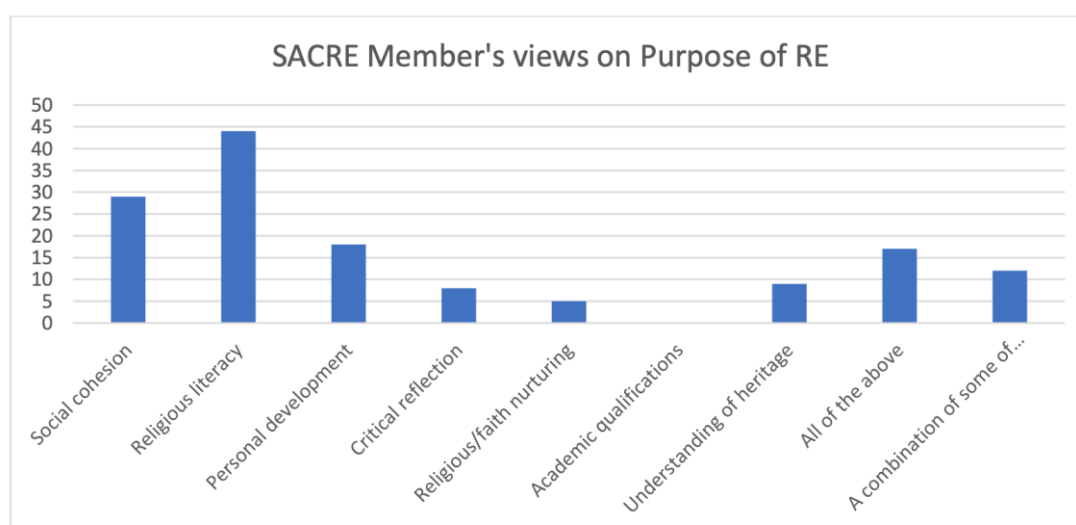


In reflecting on why this social function of RE might be so prioritised, Plater (2019) wonders whether the political and social context of the Prevent programme and the government narrative of community cohesion from 2007 onwards might be key. These narratives were the background context of some of the key reports on RE (such as Clarke and Woodhead 2015; Shaw and Dinham 2015; CORAB 2015; the APPG on RE 2016. See also Harvey 2021). These reports suggested that religious literacy should begin in the classroom as a space where students are exposed to diversity and where ignorance can be 'broken down' (CORAB 2015, 36).<sup>11</sup>

There has been much subsequent debate as to whether developing religious literacy is, or should be, a primary purpose for RE. Martha Shaw (2019), for instance, argues that there is some 'tentative consensus' around religious literacy as an aim for RE, despite its lack of agreed-upon definition (2019, 150). To address this, she has developed a framework of 'religion and worldview literacy' as an educational model for use in the classroom, arguing that this could 'bridge perceived tensions between intrinsic and instrumental aims of RE', between the twin aims of academic enquiry and personal development (2019, 150 and 157). Hannam and Biesta (2019) and Hannam et al. (2020), on the other hand, argue that religious literacy should not be considered the primary purpose of RE. They critique the assumption that

<sup>11</sup> Although religious literacy had been proposed as an aim for RE long before this, for example, Wright, 1993.

religious literacy in and of itself leads to greater social cohesion. 'Understanding does not *automatically* translate into care, or respect, or friendship', in fact it can 'lead to the opposite: to disrespect, hate, and so on' (Hannam and Biesta 2019, 58, emphasis in original). Hannam et al. (2020) also suggest that the functional religious literacy most often proposed is an 'ability to navigate the domain' of RE which is a socialisation into a particular political and social community. It is not an 'emancipatory' form of religious literacy which involves a critique of the very notion of the domain and of who gets to define it (2020, 222). This second form of critical religious literacy, they suggest, should be the remit of all of education, not just of RE.

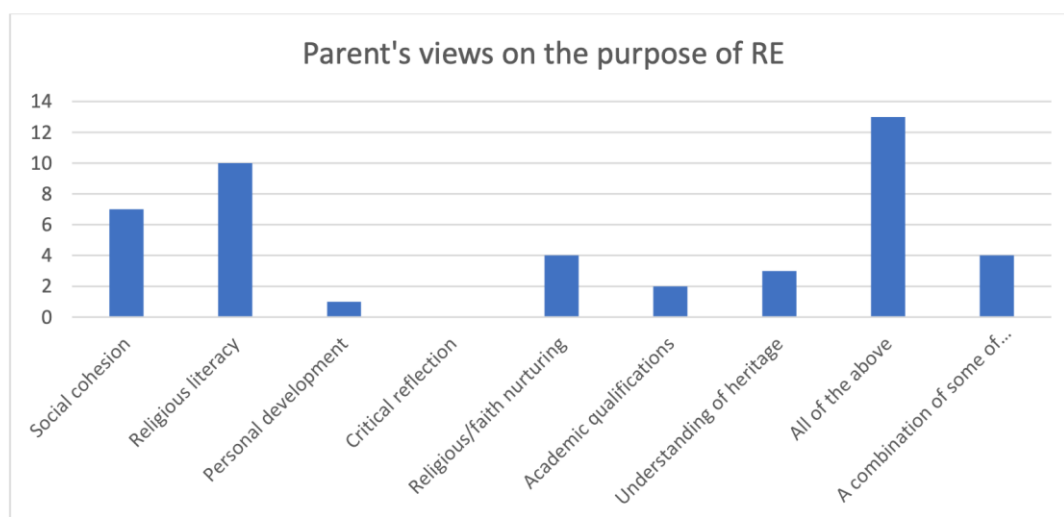


The idea that Religious Education should offer some kind of personal and even spiritual development for the child corresponds more closely to parent's views as to the purpose of RE. The most popular purpose of RE for the parents who responded to our survey (28%, n=45) was 'all purposes'; with religious literacy and social cohesion as second and third respectively.

In the focus group discussions, both community groups and parents' placed an emphasis on RE as being about developing a 'good person' and moral guidance. RE was considered a potential space to explore the meaning of life, big questions, and philosophical ideas, as well as a good space for building understanding of self, others and the world. For instance, one parent thought that RE with a focus on God or a supreme being or prayer would provide a 'top-layer of understanding' only whilst it should be about much more than this.

*...all the things that children learn from a young age like gender, religion, ethnicity, language, it could link all this together and develop a concept which is like accepting everybody equally and...developing the whole character of the child.*

This did not seem to be considered as faith nurturing, however, but rather as personal development.



The focus group with parents (n=3), voiced a consensus that RE should be a space for developing the whole child, a 'stepping back' to look at the 'big picture'. The participants spoke about the need for children to develop a 'multicultural competence' - understanding difference and making connections to the communities around them – as well as about making sense of their own stories – 'the stories to understand ourselves'. For instance, when discussing the value of RE, one parent said:

*It's part of connecting the child to the communities that are around them and part of that understanding, that sort of multicultural competence to an extent, starting them off on the journey towards understanding different cultures and different faiths and also connecting them to the sense-making part of things, like how do different communities make sense of their own story.*

Like the community group members, they saw RE as being about understanding self and others.

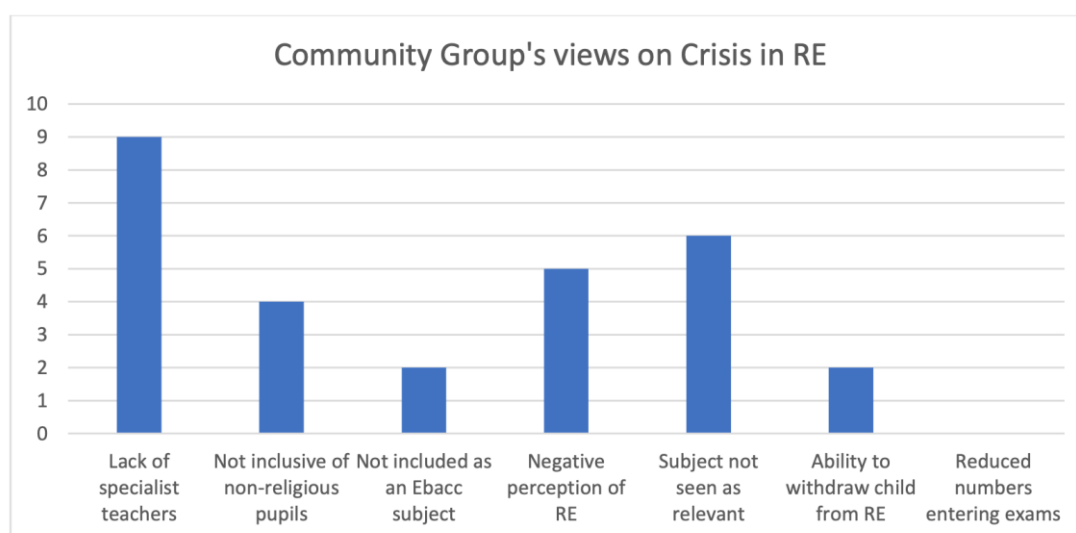
However, within our stakeholder groups, it was only the academics and policy professionals who saw a lack of clarity of purpose as problematic and who highlighted a need for conceptual reclarification as one of the contemporary challenges facing RE. In this, they could be at odds with the other stakeholders who seem less concerned about the diversity of purposes and are keen for RE to fulfil a social function. However, it is possible that the lack of value most stakeholders placed on academic achievement could potentially hinder the R&W proposal which seeks to make the subject more academically rigorous. Finally, it should be noted that despite concerns around the lack of clarity of purpose for RE, CoRE 2018 does not provide a new, more concise purpose.

### **'Outside the Classroom' Views on the Key Challenges**

The bulk of our data collection focused on stakeholder's views of the R&W proposal, exploring its potential strengths, as well as weaknesses and

challenges. Participants from community interest groups and parents were not generally aware of the proposal, whilst SACRE members, those employed in school settings and academic and policy professionals were more likely to have some previous knowledge. In the focus groups, we presented the main arguments of *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward* and then played the Theos video, *Nobody Stands Nowhere* (Downe 2021). In the surveys we provided the link for the video.

After exposure to these summary sources, the majority of stakeholders were in favour of the approach. Strengths of the approach were seen to be: it is more inclusive of all pupils, particularly those who are non-religious; it has a greater focus on diversity and on the historical and social context of religions and nonreligions; it encourages self-reflexivity and the critical analysis of worldviews; and it has potential to both reinvigorate the subject and to have more cross-over with other curriculum subjects. However, it was not seen to be without its weaknesses and challenges. We have identified three key areas of challenge: structural issues, conceptual concerns and the issue of public perception. These areas of challenge appeared to be common to both the current state of RE as well as to the new R&W proposals.



### **Structural Issues:**

Arguably, the greatest challenge, the one which occupied most discussion time in the focus groups, was the structural issues surrounding existing RE. These issues – the current structure of RE and its unique place in the curriculum – are seen both as part of RE's 'current crisis' and an inhibitor to implementing the R&W approach. It is these which must be addressed first, according to many stakeholders.

Whilst CoRE 2018 did focus on the issue of teacher investment and a re-imagining of local structures of support, wider discussion to date has focused on the conceptual issue of 'worldviews'. But many of the focus groups voiced concerns that R&W, with its greater focus on critiquing conceptual categories, cannot be implemented without the time and money to develop

new curriculums, as well as additional training opportunities for teachers to engage with the new approach.

The Ofsted Research Review (2021) notes that around 54% of RE teachers do not have a post A-Level qualification in the subject and yet there is currently no government funding (bursaries or subsidiaries) available for those training to be secondary school RE teachers (compared to £26,000 for STEM subjects) (NATRE 2020). NATRE raised this problem, in March 2022, in a parliamentary roundtable discussion which asked whether RE is undervalued and underfunded. NATRE states that in addition to the lack of bursaries for initial teacher training, the 'Department of Education has missed its recruitment target for secondary RE teachers in 9 of the last 10 years' and 'No government money has been spent on projects specifically designed to support RE in the last five years' (2022, 2). Neither is it the case that all Local Authorities spend their allocated funds on the SACRE and on supporting RE (Wright 2022, 9). This paints a rather bleak picture of RE as a neglected subject.

Combined with the lack of financial investment in RE, many schools also neglect to fulfil the statutory requirement of teaching time for RE. RE is often conflated into other subjects such as PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education) or Citizenship. Our participants, particularly those working in schools and Local Authorities, stated that these concerns would impact the implementation of the R&W approach. For instance, one education officer for a London Borough with oversight of a SACRE, reported that:

*SACREs are saying teachers need more time to develop curriculums and more investment in the subject from the SLTs. (London Borough) is currently reviewing the Agreed Syllabus, with an RE teacher, but she is pushed for time. The government needs to invest. The budget determines the resources. At the moment, there is a lot of good will from teachers but not a lot of investment.*

A final structural challenge raised by our participants was the issue of parental withdrawal of children from RE. Whilst CoRE 2018 did not address this issue, previous academic reports have called for the withdrawal of this right (e.g. Clarke and Woodhead 2015). We asked participants whether they had experience of parental withdrawal – rather than whether they thought that right should be removed – and many of them had. 33% of teachers had experienced child withdrawal and 43% of SACRE members knew of instances of this in their Local Authority. Both teachers and SACRE members suggested that it was the parent's own religious convictions that often led to withdrawal and that sometimes parents changed their mind when the curriculum was explained. Three of the parents surveyed said they had withdrawn their children from RE; one because 'there was a clear element of worship rather than education', and two who were home-schooling because the curriculum had been 'hijacked' by 'woke' and 'Marxist' elements. However, some stakeholders thought that R&W might not alter some religious parent's desire to withdraw their children. In fact, they wondered whether the critical approach



could lead to greater child withdrawal from religious parents and more defensiveness around worldviews.

**Conceptual Issues:**

Most participants realised that the R&W proposals was conceived as a 'paradigm shift' from the existing approach, an overhaul of the existing curriculums and pedagogies. However, participants had a hard time imagining what this would look like in practice.<sup>12</sup> Conceptual concerns about R&W proposals focused around 1) content of 'worldview' in curriculum (does 'worldview' mean essentially 'non religion' or include nearly everything?) 2) perspective (does R&W overly emphasise individuals at the expense of community, tradition, dogmas and theological reflections?) and 3) alignment with university study (there are no departments of 'Worldview Studies' – and where does Theology and Philosophy fit in this proposal?)

Discussions in the SACRE group focused on how 'worldviews' (often understood as formally organised non-religious worldviews like Humanism) could be tagged on to existing curriculums. This creates the danger that 'worldviews' will become the 'nonreligious' aspect of the RE curriculum, reinforcing the binaries between religion and nonreligion or religion and 'the secular' which R&W, like university-level TRS, seeks to break down and complicate. One academic explained the problem as,

*There's a question of what the 'and' means. Its religion and worldviews. It sounds like it means religion and everything that's non religion.*

There were concerns, also noted elsewhere (e.g. Cooling et al. 2020; Tharani 2020), that 'religion' would be 'diluted' or 'watered down' in this approach which will improperly elide the importance of doctrines and beliefs to the nature of religion and not adequately serve the aim of developing students' critical thinking about religious claims and their personal values (Barnes 2022). For instance, one parent said:

*it is all about accepting that your world view may be different from others which is fine, but why is there no focus on questioning your world view?*

Whilst another wrote:

*I am not sure what I think about this, I do think that there is a place for critical reflection, but equally, I do think that it is legitimate to say that dogma is important too. I worry that Religion and Worldviews puts too much emphasis on the individual at the expense of community.*

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<sup>12</sup> There are an increasing number of projects investigating what a Worldviews approach would look like in practice – such as Pett (2022) *Religion and Worldviews in the Classroom: developing a Worldviews Approach. A Draft Resource for Curriculum Developers*. This was not available at the time of our focus groups and so was not presented to participants.

Some of our participants, across all stakeholder groups, worried that the worldviews concept prioritises individualism at the expense of community and tradition, as noted in the parents quote above, and amongst some of the academic participants. One questioned whether the idea that everyone has a worldview ‘buys into a kind of hyper-individualism’ when religions are actually

*about history, they're about tradition, they're about family, they're about community, they're about a much wider social configuration of who we are and what we believe.*

Another academic participant agreed, suggesting that

*It's assumed that I do have a view on the world, that I'm somehow outside looking on to it, whereas for most people what it means to be religious is not that, it's much more about swimming in the cosmological soup.*

Academics and policy professionals were largely concerned with the historical and social ‘baggage’ of the term worldviews. They emphasised that it is not a neutral term but is rather a particular theological construction. They were also concerned that all worldviews will be considered equal in a relativistic approach.

The worldviews approach could, it was suggested, overemphasise cognition, belief and ways of ‘seeing’ the world, rather than materiality, corporeality, and social networks. As a member of a schools’ association said

*The term worldview encourages a cognitive perspective and the Theos video really reinforces this – it is all about seeing. What about identity? This is more important than beliefs which change.*

Academics and policy professionals also suggested a concern with potential methodological discrepancies with TRS at the university level, with its focus on lived religion, mediatisation, and decolonial approaches, to name but a few.

However, a few of our participants also noted that a university-level curriculum cannot simply be replicated in the school context. School-level RE cannot be considered primarily as a mini-university course or a precursor to university, as it has a different pedagogical basis which encompasses the social function of education and the moral development of the pupil to a much greater extent. There is ongoing work exploring the pedagogical basis of RE (Lewin 2020; Hannam and Biesta 2019; Hannam et al. 2020), as well as different ways of instrumentalising the R&W approach in the classroom (Freathy and John 2019; Pett 2022; Revell and Christopher 2021; Shaw 2019, Wintersgill et al. 2019).

As noted above, academics in favour of the move to R&W as a ‘new opportunity’ have set aside the lack of unified definition of ‘worldview’ and its historical usages and connotations in order to work with it in practice. As

Christopher and Revell (2021) state, 'we have considered its meaning in usage'...in the current RE community, 'the word is being used to describe a shared vision of a critical, contextual curriculum, embracing messiness and diversity' (Christopher and Revell, 2021). We are in favour of this practical approach. Just as there is no single, agreed-upon definition of 'religion', and working with contested concepts is a core of both RE and TRS, 'worldviews' can serve as a container which can hold multiple definitions, aims and purposes. As such, R&W can drive the shared agendas of different stakeholders forward, contributing to productive dialogue across different beliefs and backgrounds. University educators are uniquely suited to articulating and modelling how knowledge advances through dialogue and conversation which does not rely on a universal consensus of aims and methods.

### ***Public Perception Issues***

A third challenge identified around existing RE and the implementation of the R&W approach concerns a general negative public perception of RE. Several surveys and opinion trackers which gauge public opinion on RE suggest a rather negative picture. For example, a 2018 YouGov survey asked adults 'How important is it for secondary schools to teach each of 18 different subjects?' Religious Studies was ranked fourth from bottom with 41% stating that RS is very or quite important (with slight differences for gender and for political affiliation) (YouGov 2018a). Another YouGov survey conducted with children aged 6-15 asked, 'Which school subjects do girls and boys enjoy more?' RE was ranked second from bottom in terms of enjoyment with little gender difference: 23% said they did not enjoy it at all (YouGov 2018b). YouGov also conducts a biannual tracker for each school subject asking, 'How important is it to teach Religious Studies at secondary school?' At the last data collection point (7 April 2022) the highest response was 'not very important' at around 31%, with 30% stating 'quite important'.

However, when the question is phrased slightly differently, not about the importance or enjoyment of RE per se, but whether it is important that children learn about different religions, responses are more positive. For example, a 2018 Savanta ComRes survey commissioned by Theos to explore RE, found that 66% agree it is important that children learn about the different religions and beliefs in Britain and 54% agree that better RE would help avoid prejudices towards religious people. In order to explore this discrepancy between a negative public perception of RE but a more positive perception of understanding the diversity of religion in Britain, Culham St Gabriel's commissioned its own Savanta ComRes survey in summer 2021 (Culham 2021). This survey, like those before it, asked for respondent's opinions on RE but it gave a definition of what RE *should be* based on the CoRE 2018 report and the Ofsted Research Review (2021). Responses were more positive than expected, with 64% agreeing that it is important that RE is part of the curriculum in schools today, and 61% agreeing that RE should be taught in schools (Wright 2022, 4). Furthermore, over 60% of respondents agreed that understanding others' beliefs is important across five different spaces (Wright, 2022, 3).

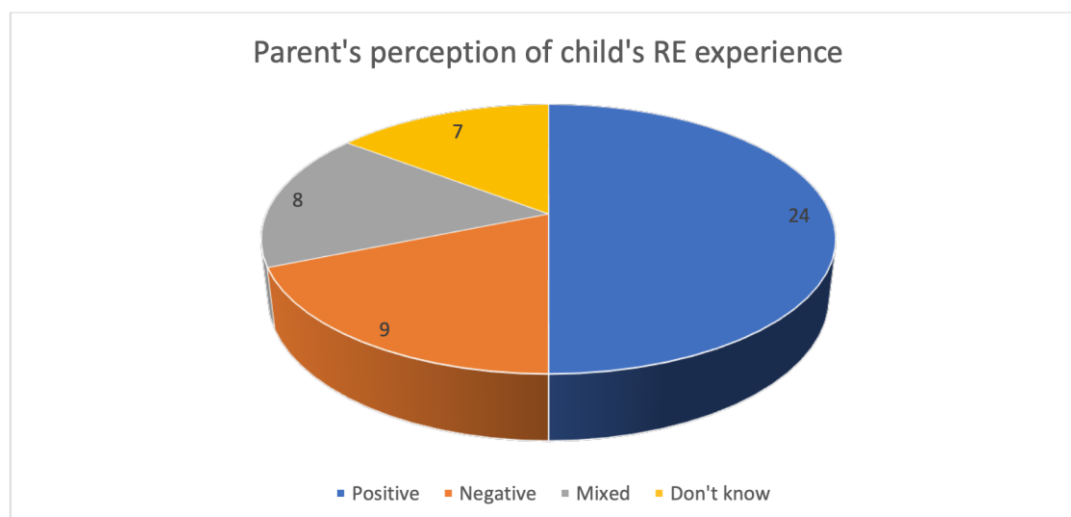
A discrepancy remains in that the general public recognise the importance of understanding the diversity of religious and nonreligious beliefs in Britain, but underinvestment and the structural issues noted above are understood as contributing to a 'crisis' in RE. RE's unique place in the curriculum has arguably contributed to its devaluing as an academic subject; exacerbated by its exclusion from the National Curriculum and the EBacc. In this way, it is seen as more akin to PSHE (which has no university-level equivalent) than to other subjects such as History and Geography. The lack of investment in the subject creates something of a vicious cycle as it can be seen to justify the general negative public perception. Public disinterest and lack of engagement were seen as equally problematic as negative perceptions amongst our policy professional stakeholders. It was argued that government, both local and central, do not see the need for reform or investment unless there is a more positive public perception of its importance. Our participants recognised that the general negative public perception of RE is detrimental to the subject and this was seen as a challenge to current RE but also to R&W going forward.

### **Parental Perceptions**

Our data has revealed something of a discrepancy between stakeholder's views of parental perceptions of RE and parent's actual reported views. Parents were identified as barriers to change by SACRE members and those working in schools and Local Authorities in particular, who stated that parents have a misunderstanding of RE as still being instructional/confessional and hence of seeking to convert their children to a particular religious perspective. However, these negative views were not borne out in data collected from parents.

It should be noted at the outset that we found it difficult to engage parents for this project. Whilst schools had reopened (after the national lock-downs of 2020 and 2021) when we conducted the primary research for this project, they still had significant limitations in terms of access. Hence our plans to hold in-person focus groups in schools could not be realised. We had to rely on social media advertising and snowball sampling through the personal and professional networks of the partner organisations to recruit participants. We only had three participants for our online parent focus group, but we supplemented this with an online survey which received 45 responses. It could be argued that only parents with an existing interest in RE would have participated in this project. Whilst the survey shows a range of opinions about RE, it is likely that we did not reach those parents completely disengaged in RE.

The parents with whom we engaged were generally positive about their and their children's experiences of RE, about the aims and purposes of RE, and about the R&W proposal. They were clear that all aims and purposes of RE were important but with the weight towards a practical purpose of religious literacy and social cohesion. However, they also saw moral development, that was not construed as faith nurturing, as important.



Some stakeholders identified negative parental perceptions as one of the major issues facing RE. Both SACRE members and those working in schools and Local Authorities discussed this as a challenge.

In the survey with SACRE members, we asked for their views of parental perception of RE in their Local Authority. The majority, 31%, stated that they did not know enough to answer the question, whilst 21% recognised that parents' perceptions varied according to factors which included whether they are religious, geographical area and type of school. 13% thought that parents had a generally negative view of RE, including five who thought this was because parents thought RE was instructional or confessional or had an aim of conversion. 10% thought that parents had a generally positive view and 10% thought that parents were mostly indifferent or confused. One respondent wrote about the complexities of parental perceptions:

*I would say most parents are disinterested or anti-RE. Most have no idea what it entails, perceive it as largely about Christianity (particularly parents of church school pupils) and don't see it as a priority.*

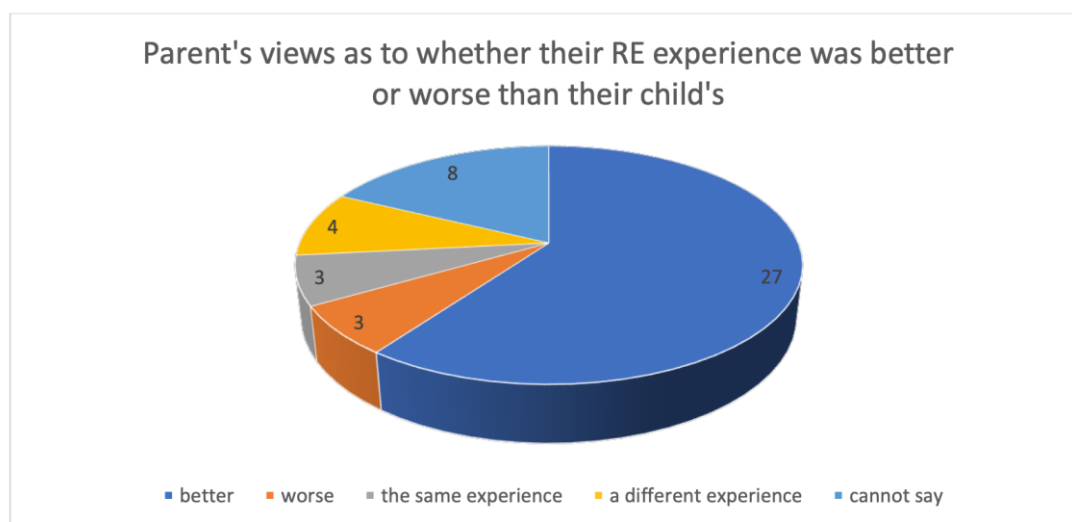
*Occasional parents recognise the importance of the subject but when so, this is due to thoughts on social cohesion and issues such as race and gender. Many parents don't feel RE is relevant to their child if they are a non-religious family. A minority of parents have issues with their children learning about other religions, particularly Islam, due to their ill perceived perception of religion as responsible for extremism.*

In the parent focus group, participants wondered whether other parent's views of RE were mostly influenced by their own experiences at school, with negative experiences contributing to negative perceptions.

Our data with parents, as well as the Culham Public Perception Survey, suggests that there might be a correlation between experience of RE at school and current view of it, but that this can also be framed positively. For example, in our survey we asked parents whether they thought their child's



experience of RE was better or worse than their own. Over half (27) thought it was better and only three thought it was worse. A similar number (51%) expressed a broadly positive opinion of the R&W proposal, with only three holding a negative view. Kathryn Wright, analysing the Culham-commissioned survey data, writes that parents of primary school aged children 'have a particularly positive view of the subject and its aims' (2022, 6). She suggests that a reason for this could be because they themselves had positive experiences of RE at school.



Further work is needed to explore the potential discrepancies between stakeholder's perceptions of parents' views and parents' actual views. It is not clear from our limited research why stakeholders identified parents as a particular problem. There remains a potential disparity between academic and RE teachers' understandings of and aspirations for R&W on the one hand, and parents' actual views on the other. The implications of this for the implementation of R&W remains an area of ongoing research and conversation.

## Conclusions

The most common way forward suggested for improving the future standards of teaching Religious Education was a call for greater interaction between these stakeholder groups. The contemporary debates around the nature and content of Religious Education and the Religion and Worldviews curriculum offer many opportunities for increasing school-university connections and ensuring that the rigor, vibrancy, and relevance of the academic study of religion is brought to wider attention. The diversity of understandings and approaches found 'outside the classroom' can be re-conceptualised as a pedagogical asset - an opportunity to model respectful engagement with difference around beliefs, concepts, and practices - rather than a negative source of disorder and challenge.

As noted, the R&W proposal builds on moves within university-level Religious Studies to move away from a focus on world religions and to reconceptualise

and reinvigorate the subject (see Cotter and Robertson 2016; Hedges 2021; Day et al. 2022). CoRE 2018 explicitly states that R&W ‘demands new developments drawn from the academic study of religious and non-religious worldviews’ (2018, 3). Furthermore, it argues that RE should be both ‘multi-disciplinary’ and draw on multiple methods. This suggests an approach in which school and university teaching on religion and non-religion could be more in tune: as Freathy and John suggest, ‘The relationship between teachers and academics must therefore be fostered in order to share expertise about how to learn about, and research, religion(s) and worldview(s)’ (2019, 23). There are, hence, practical reasons for university scholars of Religion, Philosophy and Theology to support the R&W development in school-level RE. Providing resources which proactively explain the academic study of religion, which has moved on significantly in both theory and focus over the last several decades, is an important area for university educators to consider.

While it is true that many continue to have concerns about what exactly ‘Religion & Worldviews’ might look like as a new framework for approaching Religious Education, the lack of conceptual and pedagogical consistency was not particularly of concern to parents, community groups or SACREs. Despite what sometimes seems like very impassioned differences in this field, there are also many areas of agreement of what high-quality teaching in Religious Education looks like in practice.

In fact, it is exactly the diversity of approaches and perspectives which defines the study of religion at university level, giving it a *raison d’être* and a uniquely valuable place in curriculums. Rather than seeing the debates around the Religion and Worldviews proposal as a source of confusion and dysregulation, we can better articulate the nature of academic knowledge construction in a subject area of study. It is precisely this discourse of exploring the nature and effect of perspectives and assumptions – disciplinary, personal, and collective – that is central to the academic study of religion and provides students with valued skills for employment for both the service sectors and in areas which depend upon critical analysis.

Through our focus groups, it was clear that some SACREs were well-resourced and could come up with innovative and dynamic syllabuses that reflected the interests of the major religious groups in the local area (notably Birmingham), but many other areas were struggling to find engaged and diverse members. More rural and isolated areas wanted to be able to ensure they had access to resources which reflected the more diverse realities of British cities and significant global contexts. University academics also could be proactive in promoting their subject through greater contact with local SACRE groups, sharing resources and input into locally agreed area syllabuses and creating stronger links with schools and HE providers. This direct effort could do much to create a broader public understanding of the importance and vibrancy of the academic study of religion.

Our research on the attitudes of stakeholders revealed that increased networking and resources were a desired support to the teaching of Religious

Education in schools. University academics can play an important knowledge-exchange role here in advancing our current broader understandings of religion as a concept – and its continued importance at personal, local and global levels. We can model to those more closely involved in school-level curriculum how our area of study advances without universal adherence to a single pedagogical model or doctrinal line. This could incorporate both those who identify with Theology, those who practice ‘Religious Studies’, as well as those involved in ‘Religion, Philosophy and Ethics’ degree pathways.

Some recent initiatives have helped translate academic research on religion to more age-appropriate school-level resources, initiatives which should be applauded and further encouraged (e.g. Faculty of Divinity 2022).<sup>13</sup> The Open University has provided several free online courses aimed at adult learners which also promote a broader public understanding of the contemporary study of religion in the academy (e.g. Maiden et al. 2021) and is re-purposing some of its online resources to be more appropriate for classroom use (e.g., Harvey 2022 and Robinson 2022). With rising levels of ‘no affiliation’ to religion in the general population, university academics have an important role to play in exploring and explaining why religion and worldviews continue to be significant concepts and the benefits of exploring them from different angles and with different disciplinary tools.

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<sup>13</sup> Examples include ‘Cambridge in your Classroom’ (Faculty of Divinity, 2022). This and many other university-school partnership projects (including the research which funded this paper) have been supported by grants from Culham St Gabriel’s whose vision is to promote ‘broad-based, critical and reflective education in religion and worldviews contributing to a well-informed, respectful and open society’ (Culham St Gabriel’s 2022).

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